



INCLUSIVE SOCIETY INSTITUTE

Op-ed

No national dialogue if deferred

By Klaus Kotzé

South Africa's political centre shifted in 2024. The ANC lost its outright majority, and a governing alliance was established under the Government of National Unity (GNU). To some, the GNU represents a silver bullet, while to others it simply perpetuates government failure.

These lopsided expectations of the government have again distracted the citizenry from their political authority. Citizens must look beyond the role of government. In 2025 we should all recognise, with urgency, that as a Constitutional democracy, the people, not the government are in power. We all have the obligation to participate publicly. It is our collective responsibility to advance South Africa INC. To ensure a socially just and therefore politically sustainable future, we must reclaim what the anti-apartheid struggle was truly about: people's power.

The best way to do so is to increasingly engage with each other. To listen to each other, so as to better understand the lived realities of our fellow South Africans. To reconcile is to recognise others. To bring different peoples from different pasts together. It is a principle of resolve and cooperation. Rooted in South Africa's democratic political culture, reconciliation is a powerful socio-political asset to be engaged and nurtured, so as to bring about the transformation espoused in the Constitution.

On 16 December 2024, South Africa's Reconciliation Day, President Ramaphosa impressed on the nation that reconciliation is an active process continually "healing historical wounds and forging new futures...Reconciliation is not a symbolic act. It requires a fundamental transformation of society to create a fair and just nation". To this end, he affirmed the government's "commitment to a national dialogue to define the path that our nation will take... we will hold a National Dialogue next year [2025] to enable a conversation among citizens on shaping our country's future developmental path".

While committing government to an inclusive National Dialogue is encouraging, there are serious concerns regarding Ramaphosa's approach. The first is that the government has been vague about what it intends for the National Dialogue and how it intends to do it. Instead, the government has used the National Dialogue, as illustrated on Reconciliation Day and at SONA 2025, as a political instrument to make yet further promises, while providing no direction, nor any details.

As with so many other envisaged programmes, the government's virtue signalling is accompanied by little to no action. Think only of the Social Compact that was promised to be delivered within 100 days of the 2022 State of the Nation. Inaction promises to further erode the trust that the citizenry has in its government.

A second, serious concern is the control that the President seeks to maintain over the National Dialogue. The process belongs to the nation, not to the Government. As head of the state, his role is to empower, not to determine or control the process.

As an illustration, it is useful to recall CODESA and the limited role that government had in managing it. No serious organisation would have taken part in the CODESA negotiations were it solely defined and overseen by the National Party. To be sound and legitimate, the National Dialogue process must be independently run. By declaring that Ramaphosa will appoint a National Dialogue Steering Committee, seemingly to report to and serve at Government's behest, could potentially derail the entire process.

This approach drew the ire of the National Foundations, the collective of foundations of eminent South African freedom fighters who had for some time been conceptualising and planning a National Dialogue. In a statement following Ramaphosa's Reconciliation Day speech, the National Foundations stressed that at its core the National Dialogue must be citizen-led. They were perturbed by the President's suggestion that he would still assemble a Steering Committee. Instead, they had expected the President to charge the National Foundations and a NEDLAC Plus arrangement, comprising business, labour, government and civil society to constitute a Preparatory Committee to prepare a National Convention. Such a Convention would represent society at large. It would be an independent socio-political and not a party-political product.

The government should further be cautioned against proposing that its multi-party composition legitimates its command of the National Dialogue. If the National Dialogue is accordingly politicised, it will have no credibility to begin with. We cannot allow this, we have too much to lose. The organisers of the National Dialogue must establish an independent relationship with the governing institutions. It must be clear about its mandate and where it fits into the legal and political system. Its powers, decision-making ability and dispute-resolution mechanisms, along with other technical aspects must be clarified before it starts. It is also important to define where the process will be allocated, and which government department will fund and oversee the proceedings.

Furthermore, the National Dialogue cannot simply be a talk-shop or box-ticking exercise. To be effective, it must be broad-based, extensive and inclusive. It must be nationally structured and clearly communicated, so as to ensure an all-of-society approach. The National Foundations should be commended for their ongoing engagements with numerous civil society organizations. Their authority and independence should afford them a central role in its organisation.

The legitimacy of the National Dialogue will depend on all sectors of society recognising and supporting it. Similar to the process legitimating the Constitution, it is from their extensive participation that the public will afford the National Dialogue its authority and power. Public participation is the expression of people's power. All South Africans should be encouraged to actively

participate and substantiate this process. To share their concerns, as well as their practical suggestions to make South Africa thrive.

As an initial step to finding common ground, it may be opportune that a National Commitment, in the form of a pledge, be compiled and widely distributed. Similar to the GNU's Statement of Intent (setting out its basic minimum programme) and CODESA's Declaration of Intent, which sought to establish a democratic, non-discriminatory Constitution, a National Commitment for citizens could be drafted.

While South Africans have different experiences and interests, we need to agree on and then sing from the same proverbial hymn sheet. Akin to the Patriotic Front Declaration which set out a consolidated comprehension of the country in 1991, we need South Africans to commit to a basic programme of action. One which is guided by the Constitution and aims to bring justice and progress to all.

Whereas the National Commitment would be an initiating document, a final programme of action would be compiled following the extensive National Dialogue process. After sufficient consensus is attained from delegates and a nation-wide, broadly mediated consultative process is complete, a final People's Plan for South Africa should be debated and then assembled.

Whereas the National Development Plan, released in 2012, involved many experts and non-governmental constituencies, it remains a product of the government. A prescribed vision. The National Dialogue promises not only to build consensus, but through consultation to channel the peoples' concerns. Its structure and its forward-looking, people-centred programme must be citizen-led.

We cannot allow the government to dominate the National Dialogue. Nor can we dither. If it is not actioned in 2025, it may be too late. An opportunity we may never see again.

Dr Klaus Kotzé is a Research Associate at the Inclusive Society Institute.